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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHSA](#) [PINR](#) [PREL](#) [NO](#)
SUBJECT: NORWAY: RUSSIAN PRESENCE IN SVALBARD WATERS

REF: OSLO 321

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Kevin M Johnson
for reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (S) Summary: Russian claims that Russian warships have been sent to patrol Svalbard waters to protect fisheries do not appear to reflect reality. At present there is no indication that any Russian warship is currently patrolling near Svalbard. Russian warships have passed through Svalbard waters in the past, and recently a Russian fisheries patrol vessel entered port in Barentsburg without clearance. Russian naval activity in the Barents is increasing and the Russian warship Severomorsk is currently en route to Bergen to participate in Exercise Northern Eagle, along U.S. and Norwegian assets. Russian naval units conducting routine operations in the Barents are some distance from the Svalbard archipelago. End Summary

--Current Events--

12. (S) Russian press sources quote the Russian Navy's spokesman, Captain Igor Dygalo, stating that the destroyer Severomorsk is already patrolling Svalbard waters and that the missile cruiser Marshall Ustinov will be sent on July 17 to patrol Arctic waters including off the coasts of Spitsbergen, the main island in the Svalbard archipelago. While the Severomorsk is confirmed as en route to Bergen to participate in Operation Northern Eagle, as of 16 July the Marshall Ustinov remains in port.

13. (S) Exercise Northern Eagle starts Thursday, July 17, with a joint visit by the Russian destroyer Severomorsk and the USS Elrod to the Haakonsværn Naval Base near Bergen. From there, the exercise proceeds up and over the North Cape near Bear Island (but not to Svalbard/Spitsbergen) to end in Severomorsk on July 29. The USS Elrod (FFG-55) and a Norwegian coast guard vessel will be in port in Severomorsk for the last few days of the exercise for Russian Navy Day.

--Past Patterns--

14. (S) Russian warships have periodically traversed Svalbard waters to establish their presence. In October 2003 the destroyer Admiral Levchenko deployed to the Norwegian Sea and transited to within 35 nm of Spitsbergen and to within 12 nm of Bear Island on the return transit. In June-July 2006 on a return transit from the UK, the same unit transited northerly to within 40nm of Spitsbergen as well. Both of these deployments/transits appeared to be designed to show the flag in support of the Russian fishing fleets rights. The current announcement (and following cruise of the Marshall Ustinov if it occurs) seem to be designed with a similar purpose.

15. (S) The GON has a different interpretation of the Svalbard treaty than most other signatories but has not reacted aggressively to challenges to their interpretation. A Russian fisheries patrol ship violated Norwegian sovereignty (in the view of the Norwegians' reading of the Svalbard treaty) in Spitzbergen a couple of months ago by entering the port of Barentsburg without clearance. The GON decided that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs should handle the situation through diplomatic channels, rather than sending a Norwegian naval vessel to escort the Russian vessel out of Svalbard's waters.

--Svalbard Treaty--

16. (S) The Svalbard Treaty is one of the last remaining elements of the Treaty of Versailles in force and is open to a wide range of interpretation on both the nonmilitary nature of the islands and on potential economic activities. The Treaty language is old fashioned and its text is unclear given modern contexts. There is a clear prohibition on Norway establishing any naval bases or military presence on the archipelago but beyond this parties can easily dispute what other military activity is allowed. Economically, Norwegians view the Svalbard Archipelago and its territorial waters as part of the Norwegian continental shelf and subject to the resource management, environmental regulation, energy development, and taxation regimes currently applied to the off-shore energy sector in Norwegian coastal areas. Russia disputes this interpretation particularly in regard to restrictions put on Russian fishing vessels.

--Comment--

17. (S) The announcement of Arctic and Svalbard patrols seems to be the latest in a regular Russian pattern of showing the flag and asserting their rights according to their interpretation of the Svalbard Treaty. Looking at the 2003 and 2006 cruises as precedent, and given the dispute over the fisheries patrol vessel's Barentsburg docking, it is likely that the Russians thought it was time to reassert their rights. Even if the Marshall Ustinov never leaves port, the Russian announcement largely served its purpose. The Norwegians' quiet response to past incidents indicates a likelihood they will downplay their response to any patrols. In recent meetings with Russian FM Lavrov, Norwegian FM Stoere strongly defended the Norwegian interpretation of the Svalbard treaty in response to pressure from FM Lavrov. Thus while willing to diplomatically insist on its rights, Norway seems unwilling to take any stronger measures to enforce its interpretation of the Norwegian Svalbard position.

WHITNEY